

## Acts 8:26-40

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Date: 13 June 2021

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[ 0 : 00 ] The book of Acts was written to a recent convert friend of Luke's. It gives an account of the historical deeds of the apostles after Jesus ascended into heaven.

! And we know historians have to be selective. They have to choose certain things and leave certain things out. And so whatever Luke has included probably has a great intention behind it.

The book spans 30 years. 30 years of the early church. And our passage in Acts 8 takes place in the first two or three of those years.

The Holy Spirit has arrived as Jesus ascended. The gospel hits Jerusalem. And the Jewish people. And then pressure mounts against the church. And it all opens with a promise.

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. You will be my witnesses in all Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria. And to the end of the earth.

[ 1 : 10 ] God himself is saying he directs the gospel. It goes north. In our passage it goes south. And afterward it erupts in Jerusalem.

Itself with Paul. And expands everywhere. To the end of the earth. The story of Acts progresses like a wave. And we see the church going through really hard times.

And then times of sort of growth and prosperity. It's like a wave. Right? So the pressure rises against the church. And then calms. And then it rises again against the church.

And then it calms. For a time of smooth, relatively, church growth. And expansion of God's people. But at this point, in chapter 8, things have gotten really difficult again.

Stephen is killed for preaching. Saul is on the hunt for Christians. And the church scatters. So before we go any further, let's pray.

[ 2 : 13 ] Father, we give thanks for this account of the early church. We pray that you would continue to work your spirit in us and spread your gospel. Give us wisdom, Lord, to know how to do that.

Give us furthermore trust in you, Lord, that we would know that you direct the spread of your gospel. In Jesus' name, amen. I must go down to the seas again.

To the lonely sea and the sky. And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by. And the wheels kick and the winds song.

And the white sails shaking. And a gray mist on the sea's face. And a gray dawn breaking. This is a bit of a poem by John Maysfield.

It's called Sea Fever. I must go down to the seas again. To the lonely sea and the sky. And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by.

[ 3 : 19 ] Lost. Lost. Or the threat of losing one's direction. This is the story of so many sailors. And it's the very feeling of so much Christian evangelism.

If we think of evangelism as guiding someone to Christ. Through a presentation, particularly of the gospel. Then why is it so difficult to do? The lonely sea.

No map. No direction. No star to steer her by. That so often feels like evangelism to me. You ask teachers. Maybe parents.

I was having a conversation with a house master at school last week. He has 50 teenage boys living in this house. And he's basically in loco parentis in charge of them.

And he says, my first few years I was always trying to figure out what's the right answer. What's the right response to this problem? And then what did he realize? The right response is to make it up as you go.

[ 4 : 18 ] And draw a firm line. Be decisive. That was it. But until then, he had so little guidance. So little direction. And I think it's similar.

Christians get into conversations with someone who wants to know about the gospel. Yeah, there's some clear things. But where do I go? What do I do? What I hope we see tonight is that we need God in order for the gospel to spread.

And Acts 8 demonstrates that only God actually directs evangelism. It's not so much up to us. It's not up to us as much as we might think as Christians to spread the gospel.

It's a great relief, actually, and a great inspiration. The text here indicates that we must evangelize to whom. We must evangelize how.

And we must evangelize where God directs. So if God directs evangelism, the implication then is for us to follow his lead.

[ 5 : 18 ] And to whom, how, and where. Let's look at the first few verses here. Now, an angel of the Lord said to Philip, Rise and go down south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.

This is a desert place. So he arose and went, and there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. He was in charge of all her treasure.

He had come to Jerusalem to worship. Briefly, Philip is not one of the 12 apostles. He's introduced in the 6th chapter of Acts.

So he's added on a little bit later. This is a new person in the story. Gaza is, as far as I'm aware, where it still is today. So in the southern part of Israel. Philip walks 30 miles to get there.

And he comes across a very peculiar site. An Ethiopian. For Romans and Greeks at the time, an Ethiopian meant anyone, really, south and or west of Egypt.

[ 6 : 25 ] So anywhere on the continent of Africa. And finally, one last contextual note is Candace could be a name.

It's probably a role. It's probably like Pharaoh. Okay? So this is a particular role. And this guy's in charge of all the money, obviously. So Philip comes up behind this man.

Right? He's on the path. He probably slows down. Right? Maybe he snoops up, hops off the path to get a better look. And then he hears something. The Ethiopian is reading the Old Testament.

The only testament of the time. He's reading the scriptures. And it turns out that this guy is a worshipping, as a Jew, 1,200 miles from home. Unexpected.

Unexpected, to say the least. To whom does God direct Philip? God directs Philip to a powerful, pious, for Philip, exotic traveler.

[ 7 : 24 ] It was about ten years ago now. And I had just boarded a 6 a.m. train from St. Louis to Chicago. Yes, Americans do ride trains sometimes.

I had a coffee, a little breakfast. And I was ready for my trip to the Windy City. I sit down. And I'm looking out the window. And I hear someone say, can I sit next to you?

I say, yeah, sure, that's fine. That's fine. And I start looking back out the window. So I don't have any idea who this is. And it's a little early to start really getting conversation going for me.

But he starts talking to me. And he's telling me about his trip to St. Louis, having come from Chicago. And he says he was there for television trials.

It turns out the guy next to me is a black American, gay man, born and bred in Kentucky. He had made a living partly by doing Barry Manilow impressions.

[ 8 : 26 ] Barry Manilow covers. His name was Terrence. I think, you know, Barry Manilow is only evangelist.

Terrence and I have a little in common at this point. But by the time he arrived in Chicago, I had heard about his teen years as a churchgoer. About his current life as a gay man.

About his current search for God. As far as I know, Terrence had no Ethiopian roots that we knew of. And there was no train side baptism in this case.

But I was able to evangelize to some degree, to some extent. To share the good news of Christ with a man in need. I don't know what happened to Terrence. I did spend about 30 seconds this week looking up Barry Manilow covers on YouTube.

But I know this. I know this. I may have directed the questions, but God directed Terrence to me and directed me to Terrence. Was Philip like this Ethiopian?

[ 9 : 33 ] No. Ethiopian was from another part of the world. He was rich. With high status. And a pious Jew. Philip was a traveling evangelist.

Probably poor. And he was part of a church. A new church movement. But he evangelizes to whom God directed him. Our gifts and backgrounds are important.

And God often uses them. But ultimately, God himself directs evangelism. So we must evangelize to whom God directs us.

But we must evangelize also how or in the way that God directs. Let's go to verse 29. We left Philip eavesdropping on the Ethiopian.

And the spirit said to Philip, go over and join this chariot. So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet.

[10:33] And he asked, do you understand what you are reading? And he said, how can I unless someone guides me? Philip is eager in this case.

He runs over. Was he bold? Was he inspired by the scripture he heard? Was he curious? The text actually gives us the answer. It answers this question. The spirit is the explanation.

So again, God is directing Philip in quite a direct supernatural way. And when he asked, do you understand what you're reading?

The Ethiopian responds, how can I unless someone guides me? I generally try to avoid saying this.

But the Greek gives us some insight here. In the Greek language, you can add a few words to indicate that someone asks a question and expects a negative response.

It's like me saying, did you really clean the dishes? Right? I'm expecting you to say no, or at least I don't believe you. Okay? And so you can do the same thing here.

[11:37] We can't see it in the Bible we have in front of us. Right? Do you understand what you are reading? And he's saying, do you really understand this?

Do you get what's going on? Now, Philip is invited in. And of all texts to be talking about, this text is the groundwork for the atonement. Like a sheep, he was led to the slaughter.

Like a lamb before its shearer is silent, he opens not its mouth. Many of us will know this. It's a Christian's dream. Can you just clarify for me who this guy is in the Bible that has to suffer on, or what this is about this person needing to suffer on the people's behalf?

It's like when I'm taking students through GCSE material. Someone asks, sure, this atonement thing, can you explain how Jesus heals the rift between God and man? Sure.

Sure. I can do that. Since you asked. Right? Philip's thinking this is too easy. God puts the opportunity in Philip's lap, and how does Philip respond? He shares the good news about Christ.

[12:40] He opens his mouth, and beginning with this scripture, he told him the good news about Jesus. We also see Christ directing evangelism in the Gospels.

In Luke 7, we don't necessarily need to turn there, but Luke 7, Jesus heals someone. He works one of his miracles, and people witness this, and then they go around sort of spreading this announcement about Jesus.

The news in that sense is spread by Christ. And this is just one example of how Jesus directs the good news about himself. If we looked at Jesus longer, we would realize that he is indeed the great evangelist.

God is the great evangelist, and Jesus is particularly. Surely. Other times he rebukes people.

Sometimes he directs a question, or shows from the Old Testament how he is the Christ.

But he always knows how to guide the process. He always knows. I think we're all over the board on how we get the Gospel out there. If I was to ask people around here.

[13:55] And Gethman kindly told us about the Catalyst Conference, and there was quite a bit on apologetics there. We were hearing about theologians who thought at one time they didn't need apologetics.

So there's a famous Reformed theologian who says, I don't need apologetics. That sort of discounts the power of the Spirit to work through the Word. And he comes to realize that God works through human means to spread his Gospel.

He uses things like psychology, personal relationships, cultural studies of whatever sort. Spread his Word. So there's all sorts of options.

Option one, craft elaborate creative methods to direct the Gospel. Option two, don't worry about anything except for substitutionary atonement. What else could we need?

Option three, how I live is all that matters. So we don't need evangelism. It's life on life.

[14:59] I think all of these are good. I think they all indicate a desire to share Christ. But this passage keeps a few essentials at the forefront.

We need God to direct the how of evangelism. In this story, he uses a clear opportunity. He uses the Scriptures and the person of Christ.

Don't neglect the basics. Jesus is central. And secondly, start with wherever people happen to be on their journey.

I think that's key. One of the Catalyst presentations had quite a bit of commentary and analysis on culture. I think a lot of it was correct. I think it's helpful.

And I think the overarching aspect of what to do with that, or the point that those sorts of presentations are making, is often saying, for people who don't know about Christ, Christians need to find out where they are and begin with where they are, what's working in their minds and in their hearts, and so on.

[16:07] And then go from there. And this is where Philip meets the Ethiopian. Ethiopian is reading. He has a question. This is what he understands, and Philip takes it from there.

Philip needed the opportunity. He needed the Scriptures and the good news about Christ to evangelize. God directed the way in which the gospel would spread. And we too must obey accordingly.

Third, and finally, we must evangelize where God directs. Where God directs. Verse 36. And as they were going along the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, See, here is water. What prevents me from being baptized? And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him there. This passage confirms that no barriers hinder the gospel.

Luke shows that no heritage, no background, no particular religious tradition is required. This baptism confirms that God saves anyone. God saves anyone. And then the friendship concludes.

[17:22] It concludes in a very strange way. Verse 39. When they came up out of the water, the spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more. And he went on his way rejoicing.

20 minutes. An afternoon. Who knows how long this encounter was. God directed Philip to this location. God did his work, and then he drops Philip somewhere else.

The gospel came to Jerusalem. Pushed north. This is symbolic of the gospel going south. Potentially spreading to all of Africa.

The gospel goes where God directs it. And note where God directs Philip. Philip has a prosperous ministry in Samaria and Jerusalem, and then God says, leave.

Philip evangelizes to this Ethiopian, baptizes him, and disappears. Luke points out that Philip doesn't even see the Ethiopian rejoicing.

[18:30] The eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. Sometimes God directs evangelism in frustrating ways.

Has anyone had to leave a familiar place? A place you invested time, effort, money, hardship? Had some good friends who planted a church in New Zealand.

This is a common story, really. They planted a church in New Zealand, raised money for it, built a team, and things just kind of seemed to fizzle out until they came back to America and sort of started afresh.

You can feel like the mission is incomplete. We can say, did they do something wrong? My other missionary, for instance, done something wrong? But we can trust that God directs his mission always.

It may not make sense to us. It may not seem like success in our eyes. But God is well at work, even if it feels like the mission is incomplete. Right?

[19:35] He didn't transport Philip and think, oh no, this Ethiopian doesn't have any chance for follow-up questions. Can't tell them about Isaiah's eschatology. Have a discussion about proper church government.

If this guy could have kids, would he baptize them? That's not an issue. That's not an issue. God directed the gospel to Jerusalem, to northern Israel, to southern Israel, Africa, and ultimately everywhere.

God has taken care of his church. Did you hear about the Portobello preacher? During lockdown, a man decided to go out and to sing a song in the Notting Hill neighborhood.

His name is Pat Allerton. He's an old Atonian, actually, and an Anglican priest, so God has mercy on all. He took a large speaker and he took a mic to his street corner and he sang Amazing Grace on Sunday.

And he said to the news, it's Sunday and the people in my neighborhood can't get to church. So I'm bringing church to the people.

[ 20 : 47 ] He didn't have a simple message. He said that despite all the challenges and the sorrows of coronavirus, that Jesus is greater than the virus and he himself is our hope.

So yes, God uses this Anglican street preacher to spread the truth about himself. But even amidst a devastating, devastating virus, the Lord can bring people to himself through that and at this time.

God directs where his gospel goes and we must share his gospel wherever he places us. In the book of Acts, God directs evangelism.

I hope that much is clear. And we must evangelize to whom he directs, how he directs, and where he directs us. Someone has rightly said, as I mentioned before, God is the great evangelist.

God is spreading the gospel. Thanks be to God. Let us pray. God bless you.